



Weight Bias in the Workplace: Does Personality Matter?

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Introduction

- Higher body weight individuals are frequently the targets of negative weight-based stereotypes (e.g., unintelligent, lazy) and prejudicial attitudes.
- According to Allport (1954), prejudice is unlikely to be a specific attitude toward a specific group, but rather is likely to be a general way of thinking about the world.
- Workplace discrimination harms the economic, psychological, and physical well-being of larger individuals by increasing their stress levels and reducing their chances of being hired or promoted.

Present Study

- We hypothesized that differences in body size would affect competence-based judgements of female “employees,” and further that participant’s personality traits and social attitudes would influence these judgements.



Results

- Most participants (82%) reported believing the study was about weight/physical appearance and how that influences judgments of work ability or competence.
- Using Repeated Measures ANCOVAs, we found that:
 - Need for Cognitive Closure had a small significant effect ($F(2,158) = 3.88, p = .022, \eta^2 = .02$)
 - Antifat Attitudes had small non-significant effect on competence ratings ($F(2,158) = 1.26, p = .286, \eta^2 = .01$)
 - Essentialist Entitativity beliefs had a small non-significant effect on competence ratings ($F(2, 158) = 2.26, p = .108, \eta^2 = .02$)

Methods

- College students ($N = 161$) from a northeastern university were recruited to participate in this study, and the study took place entirely online.

Sample

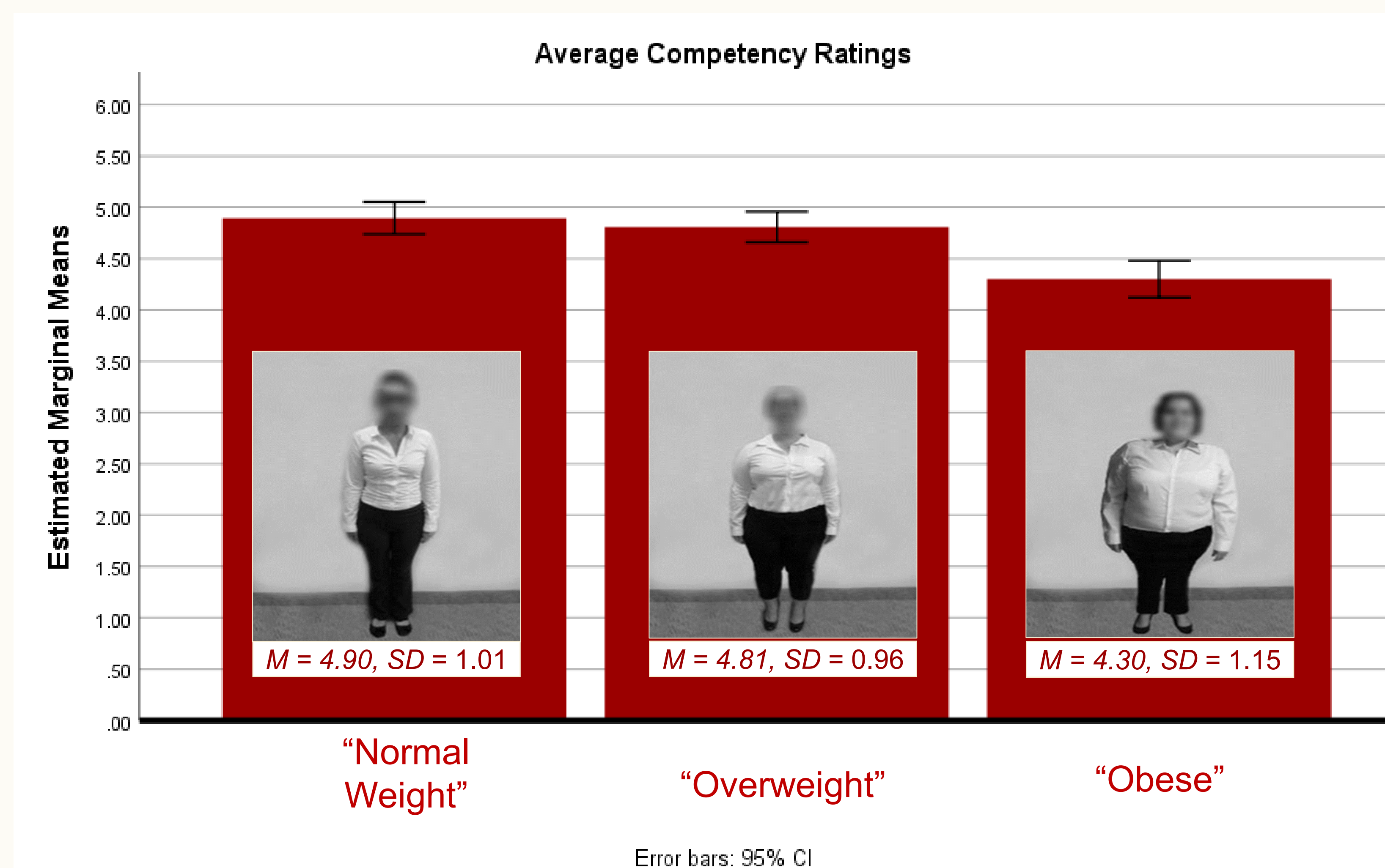
- Participants were mostly female (60.9%), and identified as White (45.3%), Black (29.8%), Hispanic (18.0%), Asian (9.3%), and other (3.7%).
- The average BMI was 25.40 ($SD = 5.06$) and the average age was 20.64 years ($SD = 3.29$).

Measures

- Participants responded to 12 images of 3 identically dressed women of varying body sizes (found in a pilot test to be perceived as “normal weight,” “overweight,” and “obese”).
- The images were rated using a 6-item global competence measure (Howelett et al., 2015).
- Participants also completed the Antifat Attitudes scale (Dislike subscale; Crandall, 1994), the Need for Cognitive Closure scale (NFC, Roets et al., 2015), and the Essentialist Entitativity scale (EE, altered to be weight specific, adapted by Roets & Van Hiel, 2011).
- Participants were also asked what they believed the study was about.

Results

- Repeated Measures ANOVA: $F(2,158) = 26.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.14$
- The “obese” employee was rated as significantly less competent when compared to the “normal weight” ($t(160) = 6.12, p < .001, d = 0.55$) and “overweight” ($t(160) = 6.05, p < .001, d = 0.48$) targets.



Discussion

- Individuals with larger body sizes were deemed to be less competent than individuals with smaller body sizes.
- These results held despite participants clearly understanding the purpose of the study, suggesting the social acceptability of negative weight-based attitudes.
- Our study further suggests that competence ratings are minimally influenced by an individuals’ personality characteristics, particularly their need for cognitive closure. In other words, negative weight-based attitudes may fulfill an individuals’ need for disambiguation and quick judgements.
- There may a threshold at which individuals begin to judge others negatively based on their body size. Future research should continue to examine body size as existing on a continuum.

